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SUBJECT: MEDIA PLAY: THE LATEST ON SRI LANKA'S POLITICAL
CRISIS

11. Summary. The Sri Lankan English and vernacular media's intense scrutiny of the political stand-off between the Prime Minister and the President continued. The Prime Minister's decision to meet with the President dominated the headlines in all languages. The reaction of political players in Sri Lanka - from the Buddhist clergy to Muslim and Tamil political parties - was self-interested. Meanwhile, English and Tamil dailies fretted about donor aid and the stock market's decline. Commentary on the continuing political crisis was extensive. Government-owned newspapers boldly supported the President and her proposals on their editorial pages. Commenting on terrorism in Sri Lanka, one independent English editor wrote, "much more resolute commitment by foreign powers is called for...." Tamil commentators were worried about the fate of peace talks with the LTTE, especially with the President leading them, as well as the stability of the government. One Tamil daily wondered, "Will this lead to war again?" Sinhala commentary focused more on the fate of a national alliance for the government. End summary.

Headlines

12. The Sri Lankan English and vernacular media's intense scrutiny of the political stand-off between the Prime Minister and the President continued. Independent Sinhala daily, LAKBIMA's headline (11/11), "President invites PM for discussions," was echoed by many other newspapers and television newscasts. Independent English DAILY MIRROR reported (11/11), "130 MPs request Speaker to recall Parliament immediately," while pro-LTTE Tamil daily, SUDAR OLI's coverage was more conspiratorial (11/11), "Secret talks with 7 MPs by PA to form government."

13. Reaction to this news was predictably split. Independent English daily, ISLAND carried the Sinhala nationalist flag with its headline (11/11), "Bhikkhu Front lauds takeover of ministries," while pro-LTTE website TAMILNET chastised (11/11), "SL President's lack of sincerity will hamper peace efforts - TNA." Independent English DAILY MIRROR carried the Prime Minister's message (11/11), "Govt. - LTTE peace talks put off."

14. The Prime Minister's decision to meet with the President dominated the headlines in all languages. Independent Sinhala daily, DIVAINA reported the basics (11/12), "Chandrika -Ranil discuss today." Meanwhile, independent English DAILY MIRROR gave more of the story (11/12), "UNF flatly rejects national govt., but PM will meet President today to discuss crisis on peace process," and added another dimension to the parliamentary showdown, "Huge bribes allegedly offered [to MPs]." Government owned Tamil daily, THINAKARAN countered (11/12), "Only President has the power to convene the parliament - MLA Hisbullah MP."

15. The reaction of political players in Sri Lanka - from the Buddhist clergy to Muslim and Tamil political parties - was self-interested. Government-owned English DAILY NEWS' headline focused on the President's proposed national alliance (11/12), "Buddhist clergy praises President's decision," while independent English daily, ISLAND reported Muslim leader Rauf Hakeem's comments (11/12), "SLMC will do its best to solve CBK-UNP Govt. crisis - Rauff ." Pro-LTTE website TAMILNET sagely observed (11/12), "More constitutional snags hit Sri Lanka's crisis," but independent Maharaja Television's English newscasts (11/12) reported Tamil National Alliance (TNA) comments that, "Because the President did not honor previous MOUs, only the Prime Minister can negotiate for peace with the Tamil Tigers." Independent Tamil daily, VIRAKESARI added (11/12), "Defense Ministry under the President, an obstacle to peace talks - TNA informs Norwegian delegation."

16. Meanwhile, English and Tamil dailies fretted about donor aid and the stock market's decline. Independent Tamil daily, THINAKKURAL reported (11/11), "Danger of foreign aid being delayed." Independent English daily, ISLAND mourned (11/12), "Bourse loses more ground with no positive political news," while independent English DAILY MIRROR reported, "Stock market plunges further."

Editorials

17. Commentary on the continuing political crisis was extensive. Government-owned newspapers boldly supported the President and her proposals on their editorial pages. Commenting on terrorism in Sri Lanka, one independent English editor wrote, "much more resolute commitment by foreign powers is called for...." Tamil commentators were worried about the fate of peace talks with the LTTE, especially with the President leading them, as well as the stability of the government. One Tamil daily wondered, "Will this lead to war again?" Sinhala commentary focused more on the fate of a national alliance for the government.

----- Under the headline, "The essentials of national reconciliation," government-owned English DAILY NEWS commented (11/12), "So, while we wish the new, "grand alliance" initiative all the success, it would be relevant to remember that it would need to operate within a conceptual framework which would make peace possible on a power sharing basis."

Block quotes:

..The concept of what is popularly termed "a national government" is likely to earn more backers, particularly among Sri Lanka's minority communities...In our thinking, such a solution could be predicated - among other principal factors - on a power sharing arrangement between the Centre and the Regions. These could be considered the basic essentials of bringing peace. However, the still-born year 2000 draft constitution, essentially envisages the evolution of the Sri Lankan State along power-sharing principles which take it far beyond our controversy-ridden Provincial Councils scheme. In this draft is encapsulated the concept of a Union of Regions which would have served as a sound basis for negotiations with the LTTE... So, while we wish the new, "grand alliance" initiative all the success, it would be relevant to remember that it would need to operate within a conceptual framework which would make peace possible on a power sharing basis. If not reconciliation would be a pipe dream.

End block quotes.

-----Under the headline, "Election gives no answer to the problem," government-owned Sinhala daily, DINAMINA editorialized about elections and warned (11/12), "The government will not be able to escape the curse of the people who would suffer the extensive damage caused by [them]."

Block quotes.

.The recent statement of Cabinet spokesperson on the need for an election is quite confusing. The current crisis has two alternatives- a snap election or a coalition government. A national government as proposed by the President would give a broader and stronger approach to peace negotiations while an election would not give any party a 2/3 majority and would take the political crisis further. The government will not be able to escape the curse of the people who would suffer the extensive damage caused by [them].

End block quotes.

----- Under the headline, "Befuddled and bamboozled," independent English daily, ISLAND commented (11/11), "Foreign involvement in the resolution of our terrorist problem is welcome and has helped to a certain degree. But the problem remains and if it is to be resolved a much more resolute commitment by the foreign powers is called for."

Block quotes.
Political analysts are now suggesting greater involvement of foreign powers in the resolution of our problem. Certainly foreign powers have played a great role in getting the 'Peace Process' going. The international political climate against terrorism of all forms resulted in pressure being built up against the LTTE to such a degree that it alone made them sue for peace.

A greater role for India in bringing about a solution has been suggested, particularly in view of the decision to sign a defence agreement. There are also roles which western powers, particularly the United States can play. But if terrorism is to be eradicated from this island- the basic solution to our problem-- much more active roles than mere diplomatic support for 'a united and democratic Sri Lanka' will have to come into play. Mere talk of 'unfurling of a security umbrella' becomes meaningless unless there is a deep commitment to eliminate the basic security threat to the nation.

Foreign involvement in the resolution of our terrorist problem is welcome and has helped to a certain degree. But the problem remains and if it is to be resolved a much more resolute commitment by the foreign powers is called for. Diplomatic efforts alone will not help...However, the problem right now is the Ranil- Chandrika confrontation which has left the country paralysed... The people right now are befuddled and bamboozled.

End block quotes.

----- Under the headline, "Will peace last?" pro-LTTE Tamil daily, SUDAR OLI commented (11/11), "Since the LTTE had undergone bitter experiences with the PA and the President earlier, it is very unlikely that they will come for peace talks..."

Block quotes:

Since the LTTE had undergone bitter experiences with the PA and the President earlier, it is very unlikely that they will come for peace talks with PA VIPs such as Lakshman Kadiragamar and Anura Bandaranaike. They will wait with patience... In another fortnight the LTTE Heroes' Day will be celebrated and we can know on that day the LTTE's stance on the political crisis that has taken place in the South.

End block quotes.

----- Under the headline, "Problems and efforts for solutions," independent Tamil daily, VIRAKESARI observed (11/12), "Peace talks are not a threat to the country. But, if there are no peace talks there is a threat to the country, eventually leading to the division of the country."

Block quotes.

"All countries facing civil war are today trying to rebuild their economies. The UNF government has accepted that the proposals put forward by LTTE have basic differences, but could be sorted out during talks and should not take hasty decisions that could affect the peace process..The President's action of taking over three ministries has put the future of peace talks in question.

Peace talks are not a threat to the country. But, if there are no peace talks there is a threat to the country, eventually leading to the division of the country.

End block quotes.

----- Under the headline, "Conspiracy to topple the government," independent Tamil daily, THINAKKURAL asked (11/12) if the President's actions, "Will ...lead to war again?"

Block quotes.

...Because of President's actions, a political crisis has emerged, the peace efforts have been disturbed, and the country's economy shows a downtrend. The crash of the stock market and cancellation of reservations by tourists are clear evidence. In the meantime the international community, which had pledged financial support, is losing faith. .Prorogation of the parliament is a step towards the toppling of the government. Opposition efforts to buy the government members at any cost is the order of the day. Will this lead to war again?

End block quotes.

----- Under the headline, "A political matrimony must take place," independent Sinhala daily, DIVAINA commented (11/11), "It is the duty of the Government at this moment to hand over state security to her, and proceed with the peace process. If Sri Lanka's destiny demands a united Sri Lanka then there should be a political matrimony between the Prime Minister and the President."

Block quotes.

We do not understand how the take over of the Ministries which were neglected would become a stumbling block to the peace process. It is not realistic for the Government to suddenly hand over the responsibilities of the peace process to the President.

It is our opinion, if the Government hands over the peace process to the President at this juncture, when she is not expecting it, then it is to embarrass her that they are trying to do so...It is the duty of the Government at this moment to hand over state security to her, and proceed with the peace process. If Sri Lanka's destiny demands a united Sri Lanka then there should be a political matrimony between the Prime Minister and the President.

End block quotes. LUNSTEAD